

Louisiana State Capitol (Old State Capitol)  
Bound by No. Boulevard, St. Philip, America,  
and Front Streets  
Baton Rouge  
East Baton Rouge Parish  
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1132

HABS  
LA,  
17-BATRO,  
6-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

LOUISIANA STATE CAPITOL  
(OLD STATE CAPITOL)

Location: Bounded on the north by North Boulevard, on the east by St. Philip Street, on the south by America Street, on the west by Front Street, Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana.

Present Owner: State of Louisiana.

Present Occupants: Various State governmental agencies.

Present Use: Offices, tourist information center, art gallery, and meeting site.

Significance: The Old Louisiana State Capitol is a sham castle, belonging to the early picturesque, or romantic, phase of the Gothic Revival. It represents the castle type, which rarely occurred in the American Gothic Revival where villa and cottage forms predominated. In addition, the Old Capitol is one of the only two ante-bellum Gothic state capitols in America (the other being in Milledgeville, Georgia), where the Gothic Revival was seldom applied to governmental buildings. The exterior facades of James H. Dakin and the spectacular glass and iron fan-vaulted rotunda of William A. Freret represent the work of two important nineteenth century architects.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: 1847-1849, 1880-1882.
2. Architects: James Harrison Dakin and William A. Freret

James H. Dakin (1806-1852) began his career with the firm of Ithiel Town and A.

LOUISIANA STATE CAPITOL  
(Old State Capitol)  
HABS No. LA-1132 (Page 2)

J. Davis, New York, in 1829 as an apprentice draftsman and stayed with the firm for four years, becoming a partner in 1832. In 1835, Dakin moved to New Orleans where he formed a firm with his brother, Charles Dakin. While the State Capitol is his best-known work, Dakin was also known as the architect of St. Patrick's Church in New Orleans, a Gothic Revival structure. He supervised the initial construction phase of the New Orleans Customhouse, altering A. T. Wood's design substantially. During the War with Mexico, 1846-1848, Dakin was commissioned a colonel in the Second Regiment of Louisiana Volunteers.

William A. Freret was born in New Orleans in 1833. He was the son of William Freret, the Mayor of New Orleans in 1852, and a cousin of the architect James Freret. Educated in New Orleans, Baton Rouge and France, he began his architectural practice before the Civil War. During the war he served in the Confederate Army as Colonel of Engineers. By the 1870s, he was recognized as a skilled architect and from 1887 to 1889, he served as Supervising Architect of the U. S. Treasury, in which capacity he designed numerous courthouses and post offices. Freret was commissioned to repair and remodel the State Capitol in 1880. (H. F. Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Co., 1956.)

3. Original and subsequent owners:

The legal description of the property could not be located. Philip Hickey may have been an early owner of the property, which was once the site of the "Hickey House," but the city of Baton Rouge purchased the property from two brothers,

Judge Thomas Gibbs Morgan and Morris Morgan. The City of Baton Rouge donated the land to the state on September 21, 1847.

4. Alterations and additions:

After a fire in 1862 had destroyed most of the building, except for the shell, the Capitol was reconstructed between 1880 and 1882. At the time it was reported that the "new" building was very much like the old. The architect, William A. Freret, did add a fourth story and eight cast-iron turrets, however. He also gave new emphasis to the north entrance and added a spiral staircase and stained glass dome for a spectacular interior.

In 1937-38, Freret's cast-iron turrets were removed. Additional renovations occurred in 1946-47, 1956, and 1967-68, but no significant alterations were made.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Since the State Capitol was the seat of the state government from 1849 to 1862 and from 1882 to 1932, it was the setting of numerous important events in the history of the state. Legislative sessions were held there and the governor, as well as other leading executive officials, had their offices in it.

When Union troops occupied Baton Rouge in 1862, the state government had already removed itself from the city. The northerners first used the empty Capitol as a prison, then as a garrison for Negro troops. In December, 1862, an accidental fire destroyed the entire building except for the shell.

In the early 1880s, during Freret's reconstruction of the building, Mark Twain saw the Capitol as he traveled down the Mississippi River.

He commented disparagingly:

Sir Walter Scott is probably responsible for the Capitol building; for it is not conceivable that this little sham castle would ever have been built if he had not run the people mad a couple of generations ago, with his medieval romances. The South has not yet recovered from the debilitating influence of his books....

It is pathetic enough that a whitewashed castle, with turrets and things -- materials all unguine within and without -- should ever have been built in this otherwise honorable place; but it is much more pathetic to see this architectural falsehood undergoing restoration and perpetualization in our day, when it would have been so easy to let dynamite finish what a charitable fire began, and then devote this restoration money to the building of something genuine. (Twain, Life on the Mississippi, ch. 40)

Governor Huey Long had a new state capitol built in 1931, completed in 1932. Since then, this nineteenth century capitol has been used for state offices.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

- a. National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination File on "Old State Capitol" located in the State Historic Preservation Office, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- b. Conveyance Records of East Baton Rouge Parish Centroplex.
- c. Works Progress Administration, Louisiana Writer's Project, Baton Rouge Unit, "Old State Capitol: A Sketch."

- d. "State Capitol," Vertical File, Louisiana State Library, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Atkinson, Roberta. "Beautiful Castle-Styled Legislative Halls to Be Abandoned for Skyscrapers." Baton Rouge Morning Advocate. November 9, 1930.

Fortier, Alcee. Louisiana. 2 volumes, Atlanta: Southern Historical Association, 1909.

Hamlin, Talbot. Creek Revival Architecture in America. London: Oxford Press, 1944.

Scully, Arthur. James Dakin, Architect: His Career in New York and the South. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1973.

Twain, Mark. Life on the Mississippi.

Prepared by John Easterly  
Historian  
State of Louisiana  
Sibyl McCormac Groff  
Project Supervisor  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer, 1978

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Louisiana State Capitol is a singular example of a Gothic Revival design for the state's most important public building. It is particularly notable for the 1847 west facade of James H. Dakin and the 1880 sky-lighted rotunda of William A. Freret.

2. Condition of fabric: Fair; the building is structurally sound with the exception of two sagging staircases on the second floor.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The dimensions are 190'x 132'. There are thirteen bays along the north and south facades, with five along the west facade and seven along the east facade. There are four stories with a raised basement. The layout is more or less a symmetrical cross-shaped plan with four wings emerging from a central rotunda.
2. Foundations: Brick.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: All of the walls are of brick with various surface treatments. The building appears to rest upon a granite basement with a double ogee molded water table of carved limestone. Basic wall surface is sandy gray stucco which is scored to resemble cut stone. The wall area around the building's three major entrances is accented with limestone facing.
4. Structural system, framing: Cypress timber framing between brick bearing walls except for the rotunda which has bolted cast iron members. Structural supports for the first floor have been replaced with reinforced concrete.
5. Porches, stoops: The north, east and west sides are entered by means of granite-faced stoops. Each stoop ascends half a story and passes through a Gothic portal. It then ascends another half story to the first floor.
6. Chimneys: There are sixteen chimneys, most of which serviced pairs of fireplaces back to back. All the chimneys have been cut down below the roofline and filled with rubble and cement.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Each of three major entrances (north, east and west) have the following design, in limestone on the east and west, in iron on the north: a compound arched lancet entrance portal surmounted by a pair of spandrels which contain a quatrefoil and a mouchette each. This arch and spandrel combination is encompassed by a massive hoodmold which is in turn surmounted by a panelled area containing cusped arches and foils. Capping the whole portal configuration is a row of battlements. The east and west entrances have a similar design above to ornament the large windows which light the second floor chambers. Each entrance portal has a pair of massive sliding doors which are treated with panels containing cusps, foils, lancets and mouchettes.
- b. Windows: The windows are all replacements from the 1880 restoration after the fire. All but a few of the windows above the basement level are rectangular with iron hoodmolds and one, two or three cusped lancets, depending upon the width. The exceptions are the great windows above the east and west entrances which light the second floor chambers. These are elaborate with large central foils which suggest rose windows and flanking lancets. Another exception is the side windows which light these rooms. Both the chambers have three lancet-shaped windows on each side which are surmounted by circular windows within inset foils. There are also a number of hoodmolded lancet windows in the rooms adjacent to the rotunda on the second and third floors. The basement level has a number of circular windows with inset foils. The only stained glass is the front and rear windows of the House and Senate Chambers. These have simple diamond panes of different colors.



8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The hipped roof is completely surrounded by a crenelated parapet with a row of foils beneath. This treatment is also used to cap the towers which occur in pairs at the ends of the wings.
- b. Towers: All of the towers are square in plan with the exception of the two on the west facade, which are octagonal in plan. Above the rotunda is a large clerestory with a constant band of lancets on all four sides. This feature was added in the 1880 restoration.

C. Description of Interior:

Note: The interiors are the result of an 1880 restoration by William A. Freret after a fire.

1. Floor plans: The symmetrical cross-shaped plan features an open rotunda in the center, and chambers for the House and Senate in the west and east wings.
2. Stairways: The main circular staircase rotates 270 degrees about a central column in the lobby giving access to the rotunda above. Ascending the stair gives an impressive spatial sequence in which the majesty of the three story sky-lit rotunda is gradually revealed. Nine feet in radius, the stair is formed of cast-iron members bolted together with a banister formed of colonettes and tracery. There is also a row of bosses at the base of the steps. The staircase and cast iron well unit rest upon a series of attenuated iron Gothic columns with foliated capitals. Other staircases in the building are more conventional with heavy turned newel posts and turned balusters.
3. Flooring: Most of the floors were replaced in the 1950s with narrow gauge tongue and groove pine.

The halls of the first floor and the second floor rotunda have black and white marble slabs which are disposed in a "checker-board" pattern.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are plaster; however, most of the offices have been installed with drop ceilings. In addition, some of the rooms on the fourth floor have been resheathed with modern paneling.
5. Doorways and doors: Most of the doors have transoms and are framed in beaded molding. The doors which lead from the rotunda into the chambers are also framed in beaded molding, but in the shape of a pointed arch. Doors to major rooms have six panels each which are shaped like foils and lancets. Doors to lesser rooms have plain panels.
6. Decorative features and trim: The mantels date from the Renaissance Revival period, being painted slate with flat designs which were cut with a router. Several have been replaced by more modern mantels in the Baroque style.

The most notable feature of the interior is the rotunda with its great central multi-shafted iron column and its fan-vaulted skylight formed of cast-iron ribs and lancets. The twelve-sided rotunda has two floors of triforium galleries and a bottom story all formed of iron panels bolted together. These are decorated with elaborate cusped lancets, tracery, foils and hanging pendants. Columns here as on the first floor have foliated capitals. Similar columns used in combination with hanging pendants and paneling also decorate the Senate Chamber and the visitor's gallery in the House Chamber.

7. Hardware: Many of the doors have escutcheon plates and door knobs which are decorated with lancets and foils.
8. Mechanical equipment: The newel posts of the main stairs are surmounted by a pair of brass standing lamps in the design of Gothic colonettes with foliage and globes.

D. Site and Surroundings:

Most of the historic landscaping is gone, much of it given over to a parking lot. The most significant landscape feature is the cast-iron fence which has lancets and foils with fleurs-de-lis on top. In addition to these Gothic motifs there are also some anthemion motifs and the fence posts are treated with pineapples. Gateposts are decorated with eagles. Another notable landscape feature is the pair of carved stone lions which flank the west facade.

Prepared by Jonathan Fricker  
Architectural Historian  
State of Louisiana  
with Sibyl Groff  
Project Supervisor  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer, 1978

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the City of Baton Rouge, Parish of East Baton Rouge, Department of Public Works, Division of Community Development. Under the auspices of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth Anderson, Principal Architect, the project was completed in the summer of 1978 at the HABS field office, Department of Architecture,

LOUISIANA STATE CAPITOL  
(Old State Capitol)  
HABS No. LA-1132 (Page 11)

Louisiana State University. The team was comprised of Sibyl McCormac Groff (Columbia University), project supervisor/historian; Timothy Allanbrook (Rhode Island School of Design), project foreman; architect Kate Johns (Arizona State University); and student architects William J. Graham (University of Maryland), Robert D. Louton (University of Arkansas), and George W. Steinrock, Jr. (University of Detroit).

ADDENDUM TO  
LOUISIANA STATE CAPITOL  
(OLD STATE CAPITOL)  
Bounded by North Boulevard, Saint Philip,  
America and Front Streets  
Baton Rouge  
East Baton Rouge Parish  
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1132

HABS  
LA,  
17-BATRO,  
C -

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013